

Editorial

Media diversity

Quality journalism requires commitment to truth, even in face of activist pressure

On Friday, USA Today reported that "ABC News has compiled a database of 480 minorities to turn to for on-air or taped comments. Employees have been told evaluations will be based in part on how many of these sources they call." The database was apparently made available in January.

In response to widespread indifference to this database, ABC News President David Westin met with top producers last week to emphasize the seriousness of emphasizing diversity; the producers, in turn, reminded staffers that performance evaluations would feature a diversity component, grading them on how often they make use of the sources contained in the database.

This episode highlights a growing trend in newsrooms across the country: activists for minority groups are demanding more "face time" and greater access to the decision-making apparatus. This, in itself, is not inherently bad, but when journalistic integrity is bent to accommodate special-interest demands, problems arise.

For example, on Feb. 26 the Western Herald ran an editorial emphasizing the prudence of welcome legal immigrants while dealing decisively with illegal immigrants. We received a call from a community activist who suggested, in part, that we should have consulted with a Hispanic advocacy group before printing the editorial. He also strongly encouraged a retraction.

Similarly, we received a torrent of criticism for an editorial cartoon that ran in early February. In it, the cartoonist commented on the irony of fighting stereotypes against homosexuals by hosting a drag show. Critics of the cartoon suggested that it was insensitive, and that the offense it caused should have been enough to censor it before it ran. Yet a survey of news stories published this year — as well as a pair of editorials — have *without exception* positively reported on the activities of OUTspoken, the campus advocacy group for homosexual, bisexual and "transgendered" students.

Therein lies the problem with the growing trend in journalism to incorporate minority positions into the media. First, it assumes that a select group of activists can speak with authority on behalf of the minority. Second, it assumes that all people that share in the membership of that minority category necessarily hold to identical ideas and preferences. Both premises are absurd, but journalists tend to ignore the fallacies because they placate the squeaky wheel. Third, it promotes a tit-for-tat approach that views all negative coverage about a minority group as an intolerable crime, regardless of the general trend of coverage.

When journalism becomes a paint-by-numbers game, truth loses. When special interest groups are given the right to censor or modify journalistic efforts, truth loses. When "diversity" and "sensitivity" are promoted so that legitimate news and opinion pieces are squelched, truth loses. When journalism as a profession decides to play a shell game with minority activists instead of seeking the integration of diverse viewpoints into the newsrooms, truth loses. Diversity is important, but not at the expense of integrity.

ABC News prides its efforts "to reflect the great diversity" in America. Responsible journalism, however, puts truth first. Sometimes, truth will conflict with the public relations spin regurgitated by special-interest advocacy groups. When spin prevails, journalism fails. We therefore regret the ABC News decision, and reaffirm the Western Herald's commitment to quality journalism untainted by the fickle fingers of factionalism.